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ABSTRACT

A study compared two models (economic and journalistic) of news selection in an attempt to explain what becomes news. The news gathering and news decisionmaking processes of three western United States network-affiliated television stations, one each in a small, medium, and large market, were observed during 12 "typical" days. Questionnaires analyzing every story on the premier evening newscast were distributed on four of the days. Propositions relating to the cost of discovery, the cost of assembling stories, and audience appeal were tested for both models of news selection. Results indicated that the economic model based on maximizing station profit explained more news decisions at all three stations than the model based on journalistic norms. (Nineteen references and an appendix giving a breakdown of the data are attached.) (RS)

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COMPARING AN ECONOMIC MODEL OF NEWS SELECTION WITH ONE BASED ON PROFESSIONAL NORMS IN LOCAL TELEVISION NEWSCASTS

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Abstract

Two models of news selection are pitted against each other in an attempt to explain what becomes news in three Western television newsrooms, one each in a small, medium and large market. Relying on both quantitative and qualitative analyses, the following sets of alternate propositions were tested:

EP1. As the cost of discovering an event or information rises, all else being equal, the probability of coverage declines.
PP1. The cost of discovery will show no correlation with the probability of coverage.

EP2. As the cost of assembling a story rises, all else being equal, the probability of coverage declines.
PP2. The cost of assembly will show no correlation with the probability of coverage.

EP3. All else being equal, there will be a positive correlation between the anticipated audience appeal of the event/information and the probability of coverage.
PP3. The consequence, or importance, of the event/information, will show a positive correlation with the probability of coverage. Absent consequence, appeal will show no correlation with probability of coverage.

The economic model based on maximizing station profit explained more news decisions at all three stations than the model based on journalistic norms.

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COMPARING AN ECONOMIC MODEL OF NEWS SELECTION WITH ONE BASED ON PROFESSIONAL NORMS IN LOCAL TELEVISION NEWSCASTS

Four decades ago the Hutchins Commission warned of an inherent conflict facing the nation's commercial news media. In A Free and Responsible Press, the Commission observed that greater numbers of people are attracted to interesting than to important news. It also noted that "people seldom want to read or hear about what does not please them" (Hutchins, 1947:57). Thus the business interest of the media in selling widely conflicts with the journalistic interest when the subject is dull or unpopular. The Commission expressed the dilemma this way:

> The press...is caught between its desire to please and extend its audience and its desire to give a picture of events and people as they really are (p. 57).

Since then a huge literature has developed about how news is selected (See Shoemaker (1987) for a comprehensive review), but few have explicitly examined this conflict the brain trust Hutchins gathered at the University of Chicago considered a primary threat to American democracy. (The Commission, in fact, argued that "no public service is more important than the service of communications" p. 77.)

It has not been unusual for an author to write or imply that news is a commodity, e.g. Emery, 1972; Hirsch, 1977; Bantz et al., 1980; Turow (writing about media generally), 1984; Altschull, 1984. But the notion of news as directly shaped by a transaction between news producers and consumers has been left undeveloped (Nienhaus, 1987).

The present study attempts a beginning. It proposes two models of news selection. The first is based on professional norms of journalism, drawn from the Hutchins report and codes of professional practice. The second is based on an explicitly economic analysis of the news selection process.

Alternate hypotheses are drawn from the two models and compared with

selection behaviors in three local television newsrooms, one each in a small, medium and large Western market, to determine which model better explains the data.

The Professional Model

Noting that the quality of public decision-making, including elections and referenda, is limited by the quality of the information such decisions are based upon, the Commission defined news as "a truthful, comprehensive, and intelligent account of the day's events in a context which gives them meaning" (p. 21). In addition, the Commission stipulated that the news media should provide "a forum for the exchange of comment and criticism" (p. 23) especially that contrary to the opinions of media owners. The Commission also called for "the projection of a representative picture of the constituent groups in the society," (p. 27) and warned against racial and ethnic stereotyping.

Professional codes of ethics, such as those promulgated by the American Society of Newspaper Editors and the Associated Press Managing Editors Association, also require news media to scrutinize society for wrongdoing. The APME code specifies that news media "should serve as a constructive critic of all segments of society.... It should expose wrongdoing or misuse of power, public or private" (in Meyer, 1987, p. 250).

The Economic Model

This model considers news content selection to be based upon a two-step transaction between news providers and consumers that schematically looks like this:

1. **News Consumers** — attention/money → ← information — **News Providers**

2. **Advertisers** — money → ← consumer attention — **News Providers**

News consumers voluntarily exchange attention (and sometimes money, as in a subscription fee) for information disseminated by the news providers. Consumer attention is then sold to advertisers for a negotiated price, usually proportionate to the number and type of consumers.

Given scarce resources of time and capital, if both providers and consumers act rationally, each will seek to gain the maximum benefit for the minimum cost. News consumers will use whatever combination of media satisfies them best for the least investment of time, effort and money. News providers will provide the least expensive mix of information that garners the largest audience advertisers wish to reach.

To apply this economic principle of efficient action (Main and Baird, 1981) to the news selection process, Dimmick's (1974) model serves as a starting point. Dimmick identified two basic processes: 1) sensing--identifying events and information in the environment that might become news; and 2) valuation--making an editorial judgment about which of these items to include in the news output. Borrowing Sigal's (1973) insight that the stage where the story is assembled also includes myriad selection choices--what angle to take, which sources to include, what background to provide--a third stage completes the selection model. The first stage, then is news discovery. The second, macro selection, selecting among possible stories. The third is micro selection, or assembly, selecting within a particular story what its ingredients shall be.

The probability of information or an event becoming news in a given market, therefore, is inversely proportional to the expense of 1) discovering its existence; and 2) assembling it into a news narrative; and proportional to the anticipated breadth and intensity of interest among audiences that advertisers will pay to reach.

Note that this model does not pretend to completely describe the economics of selection. For example, it does not consider competition from other stations, an element often discussed in the newsroom. Nor does the model specify a ratio of cost to benefit. The model is intended as an exploratory first step in testing the utility of an economic analysis.

Examining the process of news selection across the three stages yields one proposition for the economic model and another for the professional model.

EP1. As the cost of discovery rises, all else being equal, the probability of coverage declines.

PP1. The cost of discovery will show no correlation with the probability of coverage.

EP2. As the cost of assembly rises, all else being equal, the probability of coverage declines.

PP2. The cost of assembly will show no correlation with the probability of coverage.

EP3. All else being equal, there will be a positive correlation between the anticipated audience appeal of the event/information and the probability of coverage.

PP3. The consequence, or importance, of the event/information, will show a positive correlation with the probability of coverage. Absent consequence, appeal will show no correlation with probability of coverage.

Method

The present study was conducted at three Western U.S. network affiliate VHF television stations during October, 1986, and January and March 1987. Non-summer months that are not used by the audience rating services to set advertising rates were chosen because the purpose of the study was to discover routine news selection patterns rather than those existing under conditions of light viewership and staff vacation scheduling--summer--or those under extreme ratings pressure--the "sweeps" months.

Markets were selected purposively to represent three levels of news resources more or less typical of U.S. markets. One extremely large, top 10, market was included, as well as one moderately large, top 50, market and one moderately small, top 100, market. Since such a small percentage of national viewership is included in the 100 smallest markets, no representative was chosen from that category. In each market the station ranked second in ratings for its premier evening newscast was asked to participate, except in the largest market where the station with the greatest prestige--in terms of journalism prizes--was selected. This station trailed the other two network affiliates in ratings, but lagged the leader by only 3 ratings points immediately preceding the period of study.

The intermediate station in the ratings was sought for reasons of typicality; presumably the pursuit of ratings was neither all-important nor unimportant. In the largest market the most journalistically prestigious station was selected to increase variance in the data. All stations agreed to permit the investigator access to all newsgathering and news decision-making during the month of study in exchange for confidentiality. Each station was visited three days per week, for a total of 12 days. Visits were concentrated on Tuesdays, Wednesdays and Thursdays to avoid lower staffing and atypical news availability of Mondays and Fridays. Weekend newscasts were excluded for the same reason. On four days, chosen randomly, the investigator distributed questionnaires analyzing every story on the premier evening newscast. At all three stations the newscast that commanded the greatest newsroom resources was broadcast in the early evening and lasted one hour. Sports, weather and commercials were outside the scope of the study.

Defining and Operationalizing the Variables

News Content: Wenner (1985) defines news content functionally. People seek two basic gratifications from consuming such content, he concludes from a review

of relevant research: the first is to orient themselves to their environment; the second is to be entertained. Journalism textbooks also define news as factual and usually describing recent events (Mencher, 1987; MacDougall, 1977). In this study, news content is a purportedly factual account of a recent event or state of being intended to orient consumers to their environment and/or entertain them. (Note that "news" and "news content" are defined differently if one takes the point of view of the Hutchins Commission. The distinction is embodied in proposition 3 above; the Commission specifically excluded accounts of events that lack consequence from its definition of news (p. 54.).)

Probability of coverage: The dependent variable, probability of coverage, cannot be measured directly since there is no master list of all happenings in a given market that might be considered newsworthy under either model if known. Frequency of coverage is used as an indicator of probability. If certain kinds of events on the newscast--say those inexpensively discovered--substantially outnumber other events--those expensively discovered--then it is assumed the former have a greater probability of selection than the latter.

Frequency is determined by both the bias, or policy, of the news organization and the relative availability of the event. In this study, availability is relative to the need to fill an hour-long news program. To continue the example, if there are enough of each type of events--expensively and inexpensively discovered--to fill the station's newscasts each weekday, then differences in frequency of selection are due to the news organization's selection bias, not to the particular environment reached by the station's signal.

The present study makes three parallel assumptions:

1. There is a sufficient number of both expensively and inexpensively discovered events occurring within the 1,000-plus square miles of a typical

VHF station signal area that a news organization could fill its daily newscasts with stories fitting either selection model exclusively from either category if it provided the needed resources.

2. There is a sufficient number of both expensively and inexpensively assembled accounts of events occurring within the signal area that a news organization could fill its newscast exclusively with either category if it provided the needed resources.

3. There is a sufficient number of both consequential events and widely appealing, but non-consequential events occurring within the signal area that a news organization could fill its newscast exclusively with either category if it provided the needed resources.

Discovery Cost: The first independent variable was measured by questionnaires, interviews with reporters and selection editors and, more directly, through observation. One questionnaire asked reporters to indicate where "the story idea originated primarily?" In a second questionnaire, assignment editors were asked "Where did this story originate?"

Qualitative measures included direct observation and interviewing assignment editors and reporters.

The cost of discovery may be conceptualized along a continuum. Passive means of discovering events that might be selected as news were least expensive; active means consumed greater resources, principally staff time.

At each station, reporters, and particularly the assignment editor received large numbers of letters and a smaller volume of calls from public relations agents seeking coverage of purportedly newsworthy events. The only cost of discovering such events is time spent scanning mail or answering phones. On an index of discovery cost, stories describing such events were assigned a 1. A slightly more

expensive means of discovery present in each of the newsrooms studied was scanning metropolitan daily and suburban weekly newspapers. Such subscriptions cost the station from $25 to $100 per newspaper annually, plus the time invested in scanning them. All three stations also routinely watched competitors news programming to discover events. All three newsrooms also were equipped with scanner radios to monitor police, fire and rescue channels. And the newsrooms learned of events from wire services, such as the Associated Press. These two categories--other news media including wire services, and emergency radio transmissions--were assigned a value of 2 on the discovery cost index.

Information learned at press conferences that leads to another story were assigned a 3. Such discovery requires a reporter to leave the newsroom, but time outside is limited. Enterprise stories and anonymous tips were also assigned a 3. Enterprise stories--where the news organization asks and answers a question itself--require some knowledge of what's has been reported by the news organization and its competitors. While anonymous tips cost nothing more than the staff time needed to receive them, checking their veracity consumes resources.

Events discovered at meetings rate a 4 on the index. Attending meetings represents a larger time commitment for reporters than press conferences. Events discovered from sources the reporter has spent time getting to know also rate a 4 on the index because of the time investment. For the same reason, stories developed from searches of records or documents also rate a 4.

The resulting index is ordinal. Categories one and two are essentially passive means of discovery because they rely on others to bring events to the attention of journalists. Category three is minimally active, while category four requires a commitment to discovery as a journalistic function.

Assembly costs: The second independent variable is measured more simply. The metric for locally-originated news content is the reporter's time, measured in hours. Reporter questionnaires asked for the amount of time they spent on stories, including research, travel, editing or other tasks. At all three stations, a photographer always accompanied a reporter on assignment, but normally did not participate in other aspects of story assembly. Photographers were not surveyed, so their time is not included in the measure. However, the time photographers spent on each story at the three stations was in nearly constant proportion to the amount spent by reporters. In addition to questionnaires, the investigator timed those reporters he accompanied.

Time is an ideal metric for assembly costs since it covers not only the largest expense in the newsroom budget--salaries--but also dictates how much equipment the station must possess. A "crew," consisting of a reporter, photographer and car or van, was universally deployed as a single unit. Thus, if reporters completed two stories per day, not only was salary expense halved from a one-story-per-day schedule, but equipment costs--a camera and a vehicle--were also halved.

Re-written press releases, wire stories and content from network news "feeds" were automatically assigned to the lowest cost category because they consumed only one person's time--the writer--and rarely took more than one hour.

Assembly time was divided into four categories: four hours or fewer; more than four and up to eight; more than eight, up to 12; and more than 12. Given the time consumed by the demand that whatever is covered be on camera as well as all sources interviewed, assignment editors at all three stations agreed that producing a story in fewer than eight hours results in significant compromises in quality. Thus, eight hours was chosen as the midpoint of the assembly index. This is an interval level index.

Audience Appeal: The final independent variable was measured by asking assignment editors to assess the news values in each story, on a 0 to 7 scale. Two measures were computed: overall appeal and consequence appeal. The two permit discrimination between the professional model--which suggests that consequence alone is the criterion for selection--and the economic model--which suggests that overall appeal, consequence plus emotional values, is the appropriate criterion.

Overall appeal was computed by summing the 11 news values on the questionnaire. Consequence was computed by summing the two news values social consequence--"the potential of the event/information to change the social or political environment"; and personal consequence--defined as "usefulness" in helping consumers "improve themselves or their lives." Emotional (or non-consequence) appeal was computed by summing nine other news values: timeliness, prominence (of story's principal figures), human interest, unusualness, proximity, topicality (estimated audience interest in topic prior to broadcast), conflict, visual quality and entertainment. (Some may consider conflict or human interest or prominence to be consequential in themselves. In this analysis, editors were asked to treat each news value independently. Thus information about prominent people may be consequential--the governor asking for higher taxes--or inconsequential--the governor attending a charity ball. Likewise, even the conflict between life and death may have little social consequence--when an ordinary citizen is killed in an auto accident--or great consequence--if the president were killed in an accident.)

Overall appeal could possibly range from 0 to 77--very high levels of all 11 news values. In fact, the range, across all three stations, was 3 to 56. Four categories were created dividing the range nearly equally. Each category was 13 units wide.

Consequence appeal could possibly range from 0 to 14--very high levels of both consequence values. In fact, the range was 0 to 14. Again, four categories were created, dividing the range nearly equally. Each category was three units wide.

FROM PROPOSITIONS TO HYPOTHESES

Given the limitations of the data, the following pairs of hypotheses are offered. Each is a testable modification of the propositions described previously.

Economic H1: Significantly more news content will be inexpensively than expensively discovered.

Professional H1: As much or more news content that is expensive to discover will be included in newscasts as inexpensive content.

Economic H2: Significantly more news content will be inexpensively than expensively assembled.

Professional H2: As much or more news content that is expensive to assemble will be included in newscasts as inexpensive content.

Economic H3: Significantly more news content will have high audience appeal in the estimation of assigning editors than low audience appeal.

Professional H3a: Significantly more news content will have high consequence in the estimation of assigning editors than low consequence. H3b: Without consequence, audience appeal will show no association with the quantity of news content.

QUANTITATIVE RESULTS

The proper significance test for categorical proportions is chi-square (Hopkins and Glass, 1978). Frequencies were computed for each category of cost and appeal two ways: the first was a straight count of stories; the second weighted those stories by the amount of time they consumed in the newscast. The second measure is a better representation of reality than the first, because it acknowledges that not all stories are of equal length. Just as the proper metric for a newspaper is the amount of space--in column inches--volume in television is best measured in time.

Weighting frequencies by time, however, violates the assumption that each unit varies independently in a categorical significance test such as chi-square. When cost categories are compared using proportion of newscast time, rather than proportion of stories, no inflation of chances for significance occurs as long as those proportions are adjusted for the number of stories sampled in a chi-square test. (Note: The author is seeking a significance test that avoids this problem and would appreciate suggestions.)

The following table summarizes the quantitative analysis. Further detail is available in Appendix A. For each station the percentage of low cost stories--those in the two lowest categories--was compared to high cost stories--those in the two highest categories. Similarly, low appeal stories were compared with high appeal stories. A parallel comparison using stories weighted by time is also displayed. A chi-square statistic with one degree of freedom comparing the two categories was computed as well as a p value. The table contains a P for evidence supporting the economic hypothesis and an E for evidence supporting the professional hypothesis. A question mark after the symbol indicates a significance level above .05, but below .10. Hypothesis initials on the left refer to the un-weighted frequencies. Those on the right refer to the time-weighted frequencies.

QUANTITATIVE DATA SUMMARY

KSML

MEASURE	% OF STORIES		P VAL	HYPOTHESES		% OF NEWSCAST TIME		P VAL
	LO	HI				LO	HI	
Discovery cost	78.5	21.5	<.001	E	E	74	26	<.001
			N=93; Response rate=94%					
Assembly cost	95	5	<.001	E	E	93	7	<.001
			N=65; Response rate=66%					
Overall appeal	65	35	<.05	P	P	57	43	N.S.
Conseq. appeal	79	21	<.001	E	E	73	27	<.001
			N=68; Response rate=69%					

(Note: response rate for discovery is higher than assembly or appeal because it

was asked on two questionnaires--the reporter's and the assignment editor's, while assembly costs were gathered from reporters only and appeal estimates from editors only.)

The economic selection hypothesis is strongly supported by comparison of discovery costs in either analysis; KSML discovered about three-fourths of its news content passively. Economic selection is also strongly indicated by assembly costs. Fewer than one story in ten consumed more than eight hours of reporter time. Overall appeal, however, supports the professional hypothesis of no relationship between selection and the assignment editors estimation of the how interesting the story was. The editor's assessment of consequence, however, strongly supports an economic interpretation and absolutely contradicts the professional hypothesis. The preponderance of data appears to support the economic hypotheses over the professional at KSML.

KMID

MEASURE	% OF STORIES		P VAL	HYPOTHESES		% OF NEWSCAST TIME		P VAL
	LO	HI				LO	HI	
Discovery cost	80	20	<.001	E	E?	59	41	<.10
			N=56; Response rate=75%					
Assembly cost	82	18	<.001	E	P	48	52	N.S.
			N=49; Response rate=65%					
Overall appeal	45	55	N.S.	P	E?	39	61	<.06
Conseq. appeal	70	30	<.06	E	E	55	45	N.S.
			N=47; Response rate=63%					

The economic selection hypothesis is generally supported by comparison of discovery costs in either analysis; KMID discovers more than half of its news content passively. For assembly cost, economic selection is indicated by story frequency, but that pattern disappears when stories are weighted by length. KMID appears to broadcast about as much content taking more than a reporter day to produce as less than a day. That supports the professional hypothesis. Overall appeal supports the professional hypothesis of no relationship between selection and

the assignment editors estimation of the interest the story will generate when un-weighted stories are counted. But note that the direction of the data supports the economic hypothesis, although short of significance. The economic hypothesis is much more strongly supported when story lengths are included. The editor's assessment of consequence, however, strongly supports an economic interpretation; higher consequence stories are less frequent than those lower in consequence. The preponderance of data appears to favor the economic hypotheses over the professional at KMID.

KBIG

MEASURE	% OF STORIES		P VAL	HYPOTHESES		% OF NEWSCAST TIME		P VAL
	LO	HI				LO	HI	
Discovery cost	51	49	N.S.	P	P	31	69	<.001
			N=90; Response rate=90%					
Assembly cost	82	18	<.001	E	E?	62	38	<.06
			N=66; Response rate=66%					
Overall appeal	10	90	<.001	E	E	5	95	<.001
Conseq. appeal	62	38	<.05	E	E	53	47	N.S.
			N=79; Response rate=79%					

The professional selection hypothesis is supported by comparison of discovery costs in both analyses; KBIG discovers more than half of its news content actively. For assembly cost, economic selection is strongly indicated by story frequency, but that pattern diminishes somewhat when stories are weighted by length. KBIG appears to broadcast more content taking less than a reporter day to produce than more than a day. That supports the economic hypothesis. Overall appeal strongly supports the economic hypothesis of an association between selection and the assignment editor's estimation of the interest the story will generate, regardless of whether weighted or un-weighted stories are counted. The editor's assessment of consequence also supports an economic interpretation; consequence does not appear to be related to selection when story lengths are included in the analysis. The

preponderance of data appears to favor the economic hypotheses over the professional at KBIG.

QUALITATIVE ANALYSIS RESULTS

Borrowing from Rogers (1983) the principle that any single mode of analysis necessarily has blind spots, the present research included passive observation within each news department for three days a week over a month, and depth interviews. The purpose of coupling a qualitative and quantitative analysis was twofold: First, since the quantitative data was supplied from self-administered questionnaires, direct observation during the field study serves as a validity check. Second, interpretation of responses on the questionnaires is improved by the opportunity to observe the news production process in all its complexity and ask questions about it. The qualitative analysis was guided by Glaser and Strauss' (1967) constant comparison approach. This is an iterative method of analysis that begins with observations, followed by formation of hypotheses, and then an effort to position oneself to gather evidence that might contradict these hypotheses. Over the period of observation, a series of conclusions develop from the surviving and amended hypotheses.

Given the negativeness of previous studies of local television news, the investigator sought to focus on news production instances that might contradict those conclusions. In observing cost of assembly, for example, the investigator consistently accompanied reporters identified by editors as the most able. The investigator also selected for observation story gathering ostensibly aimed at issues, rather than isolated events such as fires and accidents.

Following the pattern of the quantitative analysis, each station will be examined as a case study. However, several salient aspects of the news production process were common to all three stations and need only be described once:

1. Assignment of reporters to stories was controlled by an assignment editor who made most of these decisions during a meeting with the producer and news director. Reporters rarely suggested stories.

2. Story length was almost uniform among stations and depended on the technical characteristics of the story, regardless of content. A "package"--story in which the reporter appears--normally ran 90 to 120 seconds. A "VSOT"--story in which a local reporter gathers but does not appear in--normally ran 30 to 60 seconds. A "VO"--story narrated by the anchor with videotape, but no sound--normally ran under 30 seconds.

3. There was orthodoxy among the stations studied on the use of videotape. At each station, newsworkers expressed shock when asked why every aspect of locally gathered stories must be on camera. "Television is a visual medium," was the usual (reproachful) reply. At KSML, 88 percent of all stories analyzed were accompanied by videotape (as opposed to graphics or just narrating the story); At KMID, the figure was 82 percent, and at KBIG, 87 percent.

Reporters and photographers were teamed as "crews" once they left the newsroom, covering all aspects of a story together because interviews and other newsgathering were required to be on camera. The result of this demand for video was a certain level of logistic encumbrance, primarily traveling to sites of events and sources, as well as waiting for sources to be available for the camera.

CASE STUDY 1: KSML

COST OF DISCOVERY: As indicated in the self-reported data, the KSML newsroom favored inexpensive sources of news, relying upon other local journalists and on public relations agents to learn about the local environment. Reporters were observed covering 16 stories. Of those, five were discovered in the newspaper, four were submitted by public relations agents, three were reported by the wire service and three were suggested by reporters and editors. None involved such active and time-consuming processes as developing sources or searching documents, or even attending government meetings.

The discovery function at KSML was primarily the task of the assignment editor and two assistants jokingly referred to in the newsroom as "the paper dolls" because they spent the day clipping stories from local newspapers and filing press releases from government and industry seeking coverage. The assistants also made morning calls to police and fire dispatchers asking for news of emergencies during

the night. Besides those three sources, KSML learned of events through a "scanner" radio that monitors emergency broadcast frequencies used by police, fire and ambulance dispatchers, from other news organizations such as a local radio station, competing local television newscasts, network news "feeds"--satellite born video material--and from the Associated Press broadcast wire service. KSML also bought pre-packaged videotaped medical stories and Paul Harvey editorials.

Although its premier evening newscast lasted one hour, KSML produced an average of only 17.1 minutes of local news on four days in which every story was analyzed. That's about one minute more than the time consumed by commercials. The remaining time after advertisements was filled with sports, weather and national news, even though the network national newscast immediately followed the local program.

Most reporters at KSML were assigned beats--topics to cover such as city government, police or the environment. However, reporters seldom covered the same topic consecutively. And, with an average demand of three stories per day, no reporter said he or she could spend more than a few minutes a day uncovering newsworthy events and information. As the assignment editor put it: "If you've got three stories, you don't have time to go down and have a cup of coffee with the DA." He estimated that fewer than 10 percent of the station's stories are uncovered by reporters. A poll of all eight KSML news reporters indicated that they suggest only 2 percent of the stories they cover.

The lack of active discovery was so evident, it had become the subject of ridicule by many staff members. A photographer called the premier evening newscast "plagiarism news--what the newspaper reported this morning, tonight." "The paper is your bible," a reporter confided. "Basically, "a second reporter said, "we're just given the newspaper articles and we go out and cover it." A third reporter said he

can predict the stories he'll be assigned when he reads the morning paper.

Investigative reporting is exceedingly rare at KSML. Seven of KSML's eight reporters expressed skepticism that the station would investigate suspected official wrongdoing. The eighth gave a neutral response. In addition to the lack of time to develop sources, several reporters said the station fears libel suits that can accompany aggressive reporting. On one occasion last year, a reporter said, the station refused to report on a scandal involving the mayor until the newspaper broke the story. "We had to wait till the paper came out for fear of libel. [The reporter] actually held the paper in front of the camera. We weren't saying it, the [newspaper] was saying it."

Taken as a whole, the ethnographic evidence describes a minimal commitment to actively examining the doings of local government and business. The economic model of news discovery, rather than the professional is strongly supported.

COST OF ASSEMBLY: As indicated in the self-reported data, KSML reporters do very few stories that consume more than four hours. Reporters were expected to produce three stories per day. They reported spending a mean of three hours per story.

Of that three hours, about a third was typically spent traveling to and from the scene of the news and waiting for sources or photographers. The logistics of traveling to each source with so little assembly time resulted in 45 percent of KSML stories analyzed having no more than one source interviewed. The time constraint also lead to a "site orientation"--98 percent of the sources interviewed in stories analyzed were at the location of the event. Sources inconvenient to reach were excluded from the news.

The remaining tasks of backgrounding oneself, gathering news, editing videotape, writing the script and requesting graphics (usually Chyrons--text

identifying sources visually) were compressed into two hours. Beyond reading the press release, wire story, or newspaper clipping attached to the assignment sheet, few reporters spent time preparing for their newsgathering. Such backgrounding was difficult, however, because KSML lacked a subject file of stories it or other news organizations had completed. No reporters were observed to write down questions before an interview. Nor did any reporter observed--or questioned--cover more than part of a governmental meeting, trial or hearing. In addition, KSML reporters routinely refused documents offered by sources, saying they had no time to read them.

"With this size staff," the news director explained, "it affects the depth of coverage of the news. We can't shake someone loose to do the in-depth stuff we'd like to do."

Here again, the ethnographic evidence supports a minimal commitment to news accounts that provide the "comprehensive and intelligent account of the day's events in a context which gives them meaning" that the Hutchins Commission had specified. Instead, staff is pushed to maximize production and minimize cost.

SELECTION CRITERIA: Observations of and conversations with KSML's journalists suggest that stories were selected on the basis of their interest more than their importance, but that cost constraints limited both the overall and consequence appeal of many stories.

Selecting Among Stories: The assignment editor had the key role in deciding which events to include in the newscast. KSML's assignment editor listed his criteria: "I look at visuals. I look at interest. News has moved away from coverage of courts, police, fire, city council, boards of supervisors, the governor. In the last five years, newscasts have tried to become a 'People Magazine.' I still maintain that boring as it may be covering a city council from start to finish, it contains

more useful information than any consumer feature. But it's not visual, not exciting and the impact is not immediate. So it's no longer cool to do so. A lot of this [KSML's newscast] is not news. It's entertainment." The news director explained, "we don't totally neglect government stories that statistically don't have high interest levels. Some things people definitely need to know. [But] we try to avoid stories that are big turnoffs."

The demand for stories with entertainment value was well understood by reporters. A reporter described her presence at an arraignment for a man charged with murdering a girl in these terms: "The only reason we're covering it is because we have video of her body. And because she was 16 years old, it has better emotional value to it."

Selecting within stories: Reporters at KSML were coached to go for the emotional "people" angle in stories as a means of boosting appeal. The news director explained: "If you had mere dissemination of facts, your viewership would fall off. The people angle is what draws people to the screen...." Said a reporter: "I'll always go for the emotional angle on anything. I think I have a pretty good sense of what the public wants to see. If you want all the facts and figures, read a newspaper."

KSML reporters were also coached to "tease" viewers. Despite the extreme brevity of televised stories, the news director counseled his reporters: "Don't tell them everything at first. You want to get their interest." The lead story on that evening's newscast showed how the advice applies. "How serious is the drug problem among city employees?" the reporter asked, introducing a story not about the extent of drug use among municipal employees, but about a city council debate about mandatory testing.

Although they aimed for news of the widest appeal, the lack of resources at KSML continually pulled them up short. The assignment editor repeatedly complained about having to pass on more exciting stories at a distance because the travel time would mean a reporter only turned in one story. "I'll take three mediocre local stories over one good story in [a town 20 miles north, but within the KSML signal area]. You're more concerned with filling that 60 minutes" than with story quality. "The stories that get covered are based on how many stories a reporter can cover in a day." The negative association between overall audience appeal and frequency in the quantitative analysis seems better explained by economic constraints than a professional selection ethic.

The only evidence for a professional model of news selection at KSML in the ethnographic record lay in the comments of the news director about how the production of news worked at KSML. When confronted with contrary evidence on the last day of the study, however, the news director conceded that his descriptions often were more ideal than real due to lack of staff and other resources.

CASE STUDY 2: KMID

COST OF DISCOVERY: The statistical picture for KMID is not entirely consistent. While inexpensively discovered stories greatly outnumber more costly ones, when length of story is considered, the pattern is less pronounced, failing to reach significance at the .05 level. The ethnographic analysis suggests the economic discovery hypothesis is more valid than the journalistic, but that the level of professionalism at KMID is appreciably higher than at KSML.

The investigator directly observed seven complete stories. Of those: three were suggested by public relations agents, one was taken from the newspaper and one story's origin was unclear. In the two remaining cases, more active modes of discovery were observed; one story originated from checking out a phoned-in tip

and another was the idea of a reporter. No observed stories originated from cultivated sources, document searches, or attending government meetings.

As at KSML, the discovery function was primarily the task of the assignment editor and his assistants. Also like KSML, KMID learned of news from public relations agents seeking coverage, morning phone calls to police and fire departments, monitoring the emergency service dispatchers, from other local news organizations--primarily the local and regional newspapers, but also an "all-news" radio station, and competing local television stations. Network and regional "feeds" of video and the Associated Press broadcast wire were also received. Like KSML, KMID also bought pre-packaged medical news features. Unlike KSML, KMID operated a two-reporter bureau in another city within the signal area. News discovery at the bureau, however, also depended largely on second-hand news and assignments were made from the main newsroom.

The premier evening newscast at KMID lasted one hour. Just over a third of that time, 21.4 minutes, was devoted to local news in the four newscasts analyzed. The remaining time was devoted to commercials, sports, weather and news from other parts of the nation and world. Much of the national and international news was repeated in the network newscast immediately following the local broadcast.

Again reporters were assigned beats. Unlike KSML, reporters covered stories within their beats. A poll of nine of KMID's 14 news reporters estimated that they originated the idea for one out of four stories they covered, although observation of the assignment desk showed a lower level of reporter initiative. Lack of discovery is institutionalized in local television, one reporter suggested: "Sometimes TV people don't think it's news until they see it in print. We follow the papers, but sometimes they follow us."

The nine reporters polled said they spent one hour, on average, looking for newsworthy events and information. The only reporter observed searching for future news stories was charged with covering education in two major cities, several counties, and the state board of education, as well as several major state universities within the station's signal area. She said reporters are supposed to receive one day a week to catch up on their beats, but that day is often reclaimed by the assignment editor for a pressing assignment. On her desk were a stack of regional newspapers "I haven't had time to read. It's too much," she said. Her solution to the overload was to call the public relations officers for the larger school districts and ask them "what's controversial?" The strategy is not particularly effective, she conceded, because the public information officer works for the school district and discloses information selectively, usually showing the district administration in a positive light.

Despite its location in a large city, there was no city hall reporter. "We routinely miss what goes on in city hall, except for the really big things," the assignment editor explained. "And we read newspapers to get that."

Like KSML, KMID appears to investigate government and corporations very infrequently. Polled reporters said the station was unwilling to commit resources to investigations. Two stories challenge this perception, however. Both involved multi-part series to be aired during the next ratings month. The stories both involved week-long trips to Latin American nations. The first trip, to El Salvador, was financed by an outside agency. Rather than send a reporter, the station's producer of minority programming went. The second trip, to Nicaragua, was paid for by the station--and commissioned immediately after a competing station aired stories from a similar foreign visit. In both cases, those responsible for writing the stories, complained of pressure from the news director to de-politicize their reporting. The

news director later explained that stories were "lose-lose" propositions for the station because the audience was deeply polarized on U.S. involvement in central America. If the coverage appeared to favor either side, he said, partisans on the other side might "change the channel." Such reasoning is the antithesis of investigative reporting--which seeks to reveal the truth regardless of the message's popularity.

While more attention was paid to news discovery at KMID than KSML, the station still relied more upon inexpensive outside sources to learn of newsworthy events than on its own staff. More tellingly, when the station did exercise initiative in learning of the news, it suppressed reporters' findings when they collided with the economic interest in maximizing audience.

COST OF ASSEMBLY: The ethnographic record helps clarify the apparent discrepancy in the quantitative analysis between story counts and time-weighted frequencies. Story counts showed significantly more inexpensively assembled stories than expensive ones, but when length was considered no association remained. During the month analyzed, a major story broke. Teachers in the largest school district in the signal area--one of the largest in the state--went on strike. The story had major social and personal consequence as many families were faced with unsupervised children home during the day. In response, KMID put more than one reporter on several stories and the stories ran longer than usual. Although these expensively assembled stories were few in number, they consumed a disproportionate amount of air time.

Most reporters were assigned one story per day during the period of observation. They reported spending an average of 6.5 hours assembling the typical story. Of that 6.5 hours, reporters estimated 30 percent was consumed with travel between the station and scenes of events or interviews and waiting. This proved an

underestimate in those cases directly observed, because the news director on several occasions asked for a live shot during the evening news. The live segment required that the reporter make two round trips between the studio and newsgathering site. Even the 30 percent estimate of travel time, leaves only five hours for gathering background, the story itself and writing. (Editing at KMID was conducted by photographers, although reporters would still spend considerable time reviewing the tape both to compose the script and to select quotes, or "sound bites.") With more than double the assembly time of KSML reporters, KMID reporters never settled for just one source and in 78 percent of the stories analyzed that they produced, four or more persons were interviewed. Of those sources, however, 73 percent were at the primary newsgathering site. Reporters rarely had time to videotape interviews with inconvenient or distant sources.

As at KSML, a subject file of the station's past reporting was not available. Tapes of past newscasts were catalogued, however, so a reporter could access previous stories if he or she had time to spin through the tape and take notes on what sources said. Because reporters most often covered stories within their beat, their own clip filings of newspaper reports were used by some as background. In no case, was a reporter observed to have written questions, however. About half the reporters observed examined background material. One reporter covering a news conference held by the governor explained why he didn't prepare: "This may sound like a cop-out, but preparation is not so crucial because I'm not doing a story on on any particular issue and the [newspaper's] Capitol correspondents are so knowledgeable, they'll ask the relevant questions."

Again, reporters often turned down documents offered by sources. Although the news director suggested that television reporters gather as much information as print reporters but "boil it down better," the assignment editor rejected the

argument. "Nobody overgathers information. We don't narrow it down. We simply get what we read [on the air]. I never see guys coming back with piles of information." Documents aren't very useful, a reporter explained, because they don't emote and they're not live on camera. "And my whole script will be only six paragraphs."

Here again the ethnographic analysis suggests a "surface" approach to assembling the news--one based more on creating a product competitive with other television stations than one designed to meaningfully interpret the day's events, as the professional model demands.

A notable exception, however, was the coverage mobilized for the first day of the teacher's strike. If that day's coverage is removed from the statistics, the economic selection pattern becomes even more pronounced. The effort placed on covering the teacher's strike, however, suggests that KMID adopts professional standards when a major news event occurs.

The phenomenon may be broader than KMID, however. Interviews with reporters and observations at other stations suggest that a dominating news event creates a condition in which complete, consequential coverage is the soundest economic strategy. When an event occurs that forces changes in the lifestyles of a large segment of the community, there appears to be a strong demand for consequential information. News directors, for example, point to spikes in Nielsen estimates of news viewership during events of major social impact such as the Challenger explosion and presidential elections. At many of those times, large numbers of news consumers have to make decisions and apparently seek informative over entertaining news content.

On routine newsdays, by contrast, consequence seems to generalize poorly. The decision to close a neighborhood school is vital to that neighborhood, but not

to distant viewers watching the same newscast. City council's action is important in that city, but not in the scores of other incorporated areas within the signal area. Human interest, conflict, arresting visuals, celebrities and unusual events, however, appear to attract attention across the signal area.

If a newscast heavy in consequence is seen as a threat to maximum viewership--and the television journalists interviewed clearly perceive it as such--the consistently negative associations between consequence levels and frequency at all three stations make good economic sense.

Firm conclusions about the place of consequence in television news cannot be reached from one incident. However, it is interesting to note that the coverage of the school strike was the only newscast at any station studied to show a positive association between an editor's estimation of consequence and the amount of coverage.

SELECTION CRITERIA: The field notes closely approximate the quantitative data here. As indicated in the preceding discussion of consequence, on routine news days, interest, rather than importance, clearly guides the selection process both in choosing events to cover and in choosing how to cover those events.

Selecting Among Stories: The selection process at KMID was uniquely open to analysis because the assignment editor--a recent hire from a local newspaper (who subsequently quit to return to newspapers)--championed the cause of professional standards. The news director, his assistant, the executive producer and the show producer, for their part, championed economic standards. On the first day of the study, for example, the assignment editor was pushing for heavy coverage of the threatened closure of a nearby Air Force base, that could affect many local jobs, plus open up new areas to development. The other three selectors were pushing a more emotional story about the hardships inflicted on the residents of a small

apartment house that had been without water for four days. Although the assignment editor prevailed this time, during just the month of observation, his frustration with such battles increased and his victories became fewer.

The assignment editor's definition of news did not differ, he said, between newspapers and television. "I think we ought to be doing the thing that affects the viewer the most. The rules of journalism are the rules of public service."

The polar opposite of the assignment editor was the producer--who chooses the non-locally originated content of the premier evening newscast. He expressed his selection philosophy bluntly: "I have a short attention span. If I'm bored, I know the viewers will be bored. The viewer at home doesn't give a shit."

The executive producer's philosophy was more delicately put: "TV news is a hybrid thing. We are a medium in which people have a set of expectations above and beyond news. They watch the 'A-team.' They watch the 'Today Show,' 'Hill Street Blues.' They are all well produced. When people tune in news, they want information, but they still have a set of background expectations that this will be TV, that it will be in color, that it will have some movement." To illustrate his point, he spoke of a story about in vitro triplets born to a local couple who were suffering infertility problems. "That's a story that's got everything. It's got modern conflict. It's got cute nurses and it's a damn interesting human story. It's a story that sells tickets."

The news director's selection philosophy was directly tied to economics. "The reaction to local news is primarily a gut reaction at its most fundamental level. We're going for somebody's gut and not their head. One of my responsibilities is to attract as many viewers as possible so my station can make as much money as possible."

Despite the debate among those choosing the news, there was little argument among reporters about the ascendance of interest over importance. (If fact, the staff regarded the assignment director as "naive" about television news.) One reporter explained: "For me, especially coming out of Northwestern, a school that talks about integrity and substance, I'd like to tell you my first consideration is accuracy and content, but my first consideration is making sure the people out there are watching me. You've got to be interesting above all."

"What basically is television here for?" asked another reporter. "Entertainment. Newspapers are primarily an information medium." A television newsroom, he argued, "is one facet of a large organization designed to distribute entertainment."

Selecting Within the Story: The philosophy of punching up the emotional or entertaining impact of the events was evident from the information-gathering through the presentation of the story. One reporter spoke of how he selects sources who "speak in sound bites," short, catchy phrases--rather than those who provide complex explanations. During interviews, the reporter said, he tries to provoke the source "maybe get him a little pissed off" because the emotion sells the story.

A second reporter and cameraman stirred up a near-riot among children eager to be on television when a promised news event failed to materialize. All the while, he complained, "we make it chaotic just by being here. As soon as we show up, it turns into an entirely different situation." No mention of his reservations about having created the news he reported made it into his script.

CASE STUDY 3: KBIG

COST OF DISCOVERY: The ethnographic record suggests more faith be put in the time-weighted than unweighted counts of discovery cost categories. KBIG producers used inexpensively acquired network stories as "filler" that could be added or removed at the end of the show depending on whether other stories ran long or

short. Such stories were included in a "newsreel" section at the close of the premier evening newscast and most ran fewer than 20 seconds. Their inclusion in the program inflated the count of inexpensively discovered stories, but not the time-weighted analysis.

As reflected in the self-reported data, more of KBIG's coverage originated from active than passive discovery. Although only 17 percent of the station's stories came from sources developed by the news staff or from searches of records, many stories were discovered while reporters were in the field covering other news. The news director, his assistant, the assignment editor and top producers also suggested their own story ideas more frequently than those who selected the news at the smaller stations.

Because reporters often spent a day on each story, only seven stories could be followed from start to finish within the observation period. Of those seven, three came from inexpensive means of discovery--one each from the newspaper, the scanner radio, and the news wire. Three were developed through enterprise--reporters or editors pursuing questions they felt viewers following the news might have. One story--the only one observed at all three stations--was generated from a reporter who had developed a relationship with a source. Again, no reporters were observed attending meetings, examining records or cultivating sources.

Between 7 a.m. and 4 p.m., KBIG employed five persons at its main newsroom to discover newsworthy events within the major metropolitan area the station's signal encompassed. Three editorial assistants listened to emergency scanner radios, and an all-news radio station, and scanned stories sent to the station by the Associated Press and a local news wire service. In addition, the assignment editor read the area's four major newspapers and several minor daily papers, monitored the wire services and kept an ear on the scanners. Lastly, a planner reviewed press

releases and clipped stories from newspapers and national news magazines.

The station also maintained a four-person bureau in the area's second largest city, a two-person bureau in the state capital (since eliminated), and a one-person bureau in the third largest city in the area. The Capitol bureau chief refused to permit the investigator access and the third city bureau was not visited. However, the larger bureau in the second largest city, discovered news in the same manner as the home newsroom--relying on the scanner radio and local newspapers, with an occasional story developed by reporters. All assignments were made from the central newsroom.

Non-local news--from wire services, a network feed, and a feed from regional stations affiliated with the same network--were scanned by the premier evening newscast producer and two assistants.

KBIG produced an average of 29.8 minutes of local news in the four newscasts analyzed. Like KSML and KMID, commercials at KBIG consumed approximately 16 minutes per hour, the limit set by the Federal Communications Commission before deregulation. The newscast also included sports and weather. KBIG used substantially fewer minutes of news content from the network news organization than did the smaller stations.

Only four--of 19 news reporters and field producers working for the early evening newscast--were assigned to specific beats. The remainder were on general assignment. With 19 journalists to cover an area home to about 5 million persons, a beat system would be a charade, the news director explained. Eleven of the 19 reporters and field producers polled said they spent an average of two hours daily searching for news. The average here is deceptive, however, with a few field producers and reporters accounting for most of the discovery time.

Most reporters interviewed felt discovery was not their responsibility. In a signal area with three large and scores of medium sized cities, one reporter still managed to complain, "the problem is there's not enough local news sometimes. It produces 'licking the spoon' journalism. There's not much there so you have to lick the spoon." Such a passive attitude suggests an unfamiliarity with enterprise reporting or investigation.

As at the smaller stations, most reporters interviewed and observed tended to rely on public relations officers and top bureaucrats to warn them about news even though they acknowledged that such officials are unlikely to call public attention to controversies that might show their agency in a negative light.

There were several exceptions to the pattern of passive discovery, however. On one occasion, KBIG joined with a local newspaper in sponsoring a comprehensive political poll in the region's major city. Such discovery is expensive. KBIG also partially sponsored a Washington DC bureau.

The most impressive exception was in investigative reporting. KBIG is one of the few television stations nationally to have an investigative team and a special projects producer. The investigative team coordinator has a staff of four field producers while the projects producer drew on the 19 reporters and field producers allotted to the evening newscast. Substantial discovery time--to ascertain whether a tip or hunch was newsworthy--was required for most stories developed by both the team and the special projects producer. Their efforts, however, were not a daily part of the premier evening newscast. Instead, they concentrated on series of stories that ran periodically. One series ran during the month of observation and the investigative team produced one story during the observation period and assisted on at least one other.

The investigative and special projects work of KBIG reporters accounted for many of the nearly 300 television journalism prizes decorating the newsroom walls.

News discovery at KBIG more closely followed the economic model in routine coverage, and the professional model in special projects. But those projects were frequent enough that discovery was better explained by the professional than the economic model.

COST OF ASSEMBLY: The pattern of declining frequency with increasing cost of assembly from self-reported data is generally supported by the ethnographic analysis. The modal assignment during the period of observation was one story per eight-hour day, but on several occasions reporters were asked to do more than one. Except for investigative or project stories--none of which were observed--an eight hour limit was enforced regardless of the story's complexity. A bureau chief explained the limitation: "The first criterion [for deciding whether to pursue a story] is whether or not it's doable in one day. The lead story in [the local newspaper] may be based entirely on unnamed sources. It may be a great story, but you have to ask yourself can we honestly do it in a day?"

If a story ran into unexpected snags, it was routinely put together for the evening news, ready or not. "We hardly ever pull out and say we didn't do it," a photographer explained. "We go on the air with it whether it's garbage or not." When a reporter explained four hours before the newscast that he was unable to gather new information on a planned story, the newscast producer began to scream. "God! I hate that!" she told the reporter. Even with KBIG's relatively large staff, all reporters were allocated by early afternoon and a hole in the newscast from a story that didn't develop as expected created logistical problems.

Reporters observed spent the entire eight hours assembling the story. Reporters said they spent an average of 25 percent of that time traveling between

the story site, interviews and the newsroom. Again, compared to what was observed, travel and waiting time appears understated. In two cases, more than half of the day was spent in transit. In no case observed was travel and waiting time as low as 25 percent.

Twelve percent of locally-originated stories analyzed had 1 or fewer sources; 77 percent had four or more. The eight hours allotted for newsgathering resulted in less reliance on sources available at one site. Fifty-eight percent of the locally originated stories analyzed were at the primary newsgathering site, significantly fewer than at the smaller stations.

Unlike KSML and KMID, KBIG had a library and two persons to staff it. The orientation of the library, however, was visual rather than informational. Reporters story scripts were not routinely kept by the library, although videotapes of past newscasts were available and librarians would transcribe quotes or background if asked. The exception to the visual orientation was a VuText terminal, an on-line information service run by Knight-Ridder and carrying stories from several of its newspapers.

"Our primary purpose, 75 to 80 percent of our work, is retrieving videotape," the head librarian said. "The rest of our work is background research, still pictures, slides or photos. Our main purpose here is to run a videotape film library." On only one occasion was a reporter observed to use the library for informational, as opposed to visual, purposes. As at the smaller papers, reporters spent little time preparing themselves for assignments and in no case was a reporter observed to write down questions before an interview. "Reporters are in this business knowing very little about journalism," the assistant news director explained. "The industry doesn't reward good journalism."

Only two cases were observed that contradicted the economic assembly hypothesis. The first was the opinion poll mentioned earlier. The second was an investigation of alleged police brutality being conducted by the special projects producer. He estimated that he and the reporter assigned to the story had committed 40 hours to producing the one investigative story that ran during the period of observation.

SELECTION CRITERIA: In both discussions and observed behavior, news selection decisions favored interesting stories over consequential where the two could not be had in the same narrative.

Selecting Among Stories: The news director at KBIG portrayed television as an essentially visual, emotional, story-telling medium. "I don't know what consequence means," he said, explaining his criteria for news. "Take the (Roxanne) Pulitzer trail. What was the consequence in that? It was the greatest story in the world? I'm not here to improve society. I'm here to tell good stories. It's television! It's pictures! That's the business!"

The assistant news director and the chief of the largest bureau--who recommends events for coverage from his area--disagreed with the news director. In their view, television has a social responsibility to deliver consequential information. But their remarks make clear that that responsibility is second to their responsibility to the corporation to maximize audience.

"It's been a long time since pure journalism--objective, solid substantial journalism--has won the day in the ratings," the assistant news director said. He estimated that three complex, important stories in a news hour would be the most KBIG could present without jeopardizing its ratings. Were television news organizations paid on the basis of how much the community learned about itself and its environment, he added, the approach taken would be totally different. "It would

change the whole premise on which we work."

The sequential nature of the technology exerts a pressure to be consistently interesting if audience is to be maximized, the bureau chief explained. "Newspaper readers can move on [if they don't like a story], "but in TV they have to watch each story. If they don't like it they move elsewhere. So the demand to make it interesting is much greater."

The producer, who picked the non-locally originated stories for the newscast, said: "I mostly try to play to the average wrestling fan as a viewer. If you keep it simple, you won't alienate your sophisticated viewers, but if you don't, you lose the less sophisticated viewers."

Selection within stories: With only one exception, the five reporters observed at work evidenced much greater concern with the emotional impact of their stories than their accuracy or importance. One reporter, assigned to a conference on traffic gridlock--the number one concern of the metropolitan area public in recent polls--tried to talk the assignment editor out of the story because it wasn't "visual." On his way to the conference, the reporter complained about the lack of competence on the assignment desk and turned up his police scanner radio hoping for some emergency that might save him from the meeting. He was in luck; a car and school van collided in a nearby city. The reporter called the desk and asked to cover the accident. The desk refused and told him to cover the meeting. The reporter headed for the accident, anyway, and continued to try to talk the desk into the new assignment. He pleaded, saying he was in the neighborhood of the accident--which by now he was. The desk relented.

The school van was carrying special education elementary school children with severe mental handicaps. No one in either vehicle was seriously injured, but the children in the van were very frightened and groaning loudly as paramedics checked

them over. The pictures and natural sound of the children--many of whom were pre-verbal--were moving and suggested tragedy.

As the reporter and photographer tried to track down and interview the van's driver, who had left the scene, they discussed the story. "It's your basic minor bus accident," said the reporter. "This story is big today, but it's nothing tomorrow. You're not really going to learn anything from this story. What overall relevance does it have for mankind?" When asked why bother to file the story, he quickly replied: "Anytime you've got kids on a school bus, you've got a story."

The reporter said if he were "scrupulously ethical," he wouldn't use the pictures because they overstated the seriousness of what happened. When asked if he would mute the pictures, he responded, "I'm not that ethical!" The school van collision led the newscast that evening and the opening images were the groaning special eduction children. "The secret of making TV work is making that little box flicker. It's an attention-getting device," the reporter explained. "It's a greedy, greedy, business."

Another reporter told how drama, not information, is the essence of television news. Responding to a newspaper article about a negative statement from the Pope on artificial means of conception, the reporter spent the morning trying to locate a Roman Catholic woman who had undergone in vitro fertilization. Once found, she would speak for all Roman Catholic women. "Reporters are film-makers," he explained. "We're making little films. It has to have flow, a beginning, a middle and an end, ... a well-rounded complete production. Newspaper reporters are information-oriented. They are trained to get a whole lot of information. They ignore the production side. That's because they don't understand that it's the production that's important."

A third reporter, covering health issues, was asked to attend part of a meeting

to answer her questions about a sex education plan for public school children that might recommend use of condoms. Declining to enter the board room, she whispered to the investigator: "They don't understand. It's so boring to go to a meeting. All I need from a meeting is the results. I've got to get the pictures."

DISCUSSION

The picture painted of local television news by both quantitative self-reported data and from interviews and observations gathered as a passive participant is surprisingly uniform across the levels of resources available to stations in middle-sized, moderately large and large markets. Three major similarities were found:

1. In the main, the three stations studied covered information and events that were a) inexpensive to discover, i.e., brought to the station's attention in press releases or by other news organizations such as newspapers; and b) simple to describe, i.e., not so complicated that they require more than one to two minutes of explanation; and c) at least moderately appealing to audiences.

2. The amount of local news (happenings within the signal area) reported on a routine day was skimpy. At the largest station, there was only about 30 minutes of local stories in the premier evening newscast.

3. Scarce news time was more devoted to news that profits the organization than news that profits the public. Both in the selection of events and in the selection of how to cover such events, there was a consistent bias toward emotional values--such as human interest or dramatic visuals--that in the short duration of a news story displaced information that might help viewers make wise civic and personal decisions.

A fourth, more positive, generalization found some support in the data: Both the quantity and professional quality of coverage rose in the face of a major local news event--one affecting many viewers in a significant way.

If these findings are generalizable, the social implications are disturbing, particularly in an industry that returns profits from two to five times the national average (National Association of Broadcasters, 1986). Public decision-making can only be as good as the information upon which it is based. In an age in which information is more valuable than ever, an ill-informed public, particularly one that watches "the news" and thinks it's informed, is a danger both to itself and to others.

APPENDIX

STATION 1: KSML

DISCOVERY COST: PROPORTION OF STORIES BY COST CATEGORY

DISCOVERY COST	1	2	3	4
Percent of All Stories	14	64.5	17.2	4.3

N=93 RESPONSE RATE=94%

Chi-square, df=1, 30.2, p<.001

PROPORTION OF NEWSCAST TIME BY COST CATEGORY

DISCOVERY COST	1	2	3	4
Percent of Newscast Time	15.2	58.6	22.4	3.8

Chi-square, df=1; 23.0, p<.001

ASSEMBLY COST: PROPORTION OF STORIES BY COST CATEGORY

ASSEMBLY COST	1	2	3	4
Percent of All Stories	92.3	3.1	4.6	0

N=65 RESPONSE RATE=66%

Chi-square, df=1, 53.6, p<.001

PROPORTION OF NEWSCAST TIME BY COST CATEGORY

ASSEMBLY COST	1	2	3	4
Percent of Newscast Time	86.6	6.5	6.9	0

Chi-square, df=1; 48.0, p<.001

(Note: response rate for discovery is higher than assembly or appeal because it was asked on two questionnaires--reporter's and assignment editor's, while assembly costs were gathered from reporters only and appeal from editors only.)

OVERALL APPEAL: PROPORTION OF STORIES BY APPEAL CATEGORIES

LEVEL OF APPEAL	1	2	3	4
Percent of All Stories	17.6	47.1	26.5	8.8

N=68 Response Rate=69%

Chi-square, df=1, 5.88, p<.05

OVERALL APPEAL: PROPORTION OF NEWSCAST TIME BY APPEAL CATEGORIES

LEVEL OF APPEAL	1	2	3	4
Percent of Newscast Time	16.2	40.5	32.0	11.3

N=68 Response Rate=69%

Chi-square, df=1, 1.33, Non-significant

CONSEQUENCE APPEAL: PROPORTION OF STORIES BY APPEAL CATEGORIES

LEVEL OF APPEAL	1	2	3	4
Percent of All Stories	45.6	33.8	16.2	4.4

N=68 Response Rate=69%

Chi-square, df=1, 23.53, p<.001

CONSEQUENCE APPEAL: PROPORTION OF NEWSCAST TIME BY APPEAL CATEGORIES

LEVEL OF APPEAL	1	2	3	4
Percent of Newscast Time	41.0	31.5	22.4	5.1

Chi-square, df=1, 14.4, P<.001

STATION 2: KMID

DISCOVERY COST: PROPORTION OF STORIES BY COST CATEGORY

DISCOVERY COST	1	2	3	4
Percent of All Stories	10.7	69.6	17.9	1.8

N=56 RESPONSE RATE=75%

Chi-square, df=1, 20.6, p<.001

PROPORTION OF NEWSCAST TIME BY COST CATEGORY

DISCOVERY COST	1	2	3	4
Percent of Newscast Time	11.2	48.0	39.7	1.1

Chi-square, df=1; 3.0, p<.10

ASSEMBLY COST: PROPORTION OF STORIES BY COST CATEGORY

ASSEMBLY COST	1	2	3	4
Percent of All Stories	73.5	8.2	14.3	4.1

N=49 RESPONSE RATE=65%

Chi-square, df=1, 19.6, p<.001

PROPORTION OF NEWSCAST TIME BY COST CATEGORY

ASSEMBLY COST	1	2	3	4
Percent of Newscast Time	36.4	11.2	28.7	23.7

Chi-square, df=1; .08, Non-significant

OVERALL APPEAL: PROPORTION OF STORIES BY APPEAL CATEGORIES

LEVEL OF APPEAL	1	2	3	4
Percent of All Stories	8.5	36.2	23.4	31.9

N=47 Response Rate=63%

Chi-square, df=1, .53, Non-significant

OVERALL APPEAL: PROPORTION OF NEWSCAST TIME BY APPEAL CATEGORIES

LEVEL OF APPEAL	1	2	3	4
Percent of Newscast Time	13.4	25.9	10.0	50.7

Chi-square, df=1, 2.27, Non-significant

CONSEQUENCE APPEAL: PROPORTION OF STORIES BY APPEAL CATEGORIES

LEVEL OF APPEAL	1	2	3	4
Percent of All Stories	40.4	29.8	14.9	14.9

N=47 Response Rate=63%

Chi-square, df=1, 7.68, p<.06

CONSEQUENCE APPEAL: PROPORTION OF NEWSCAST TIME BY APPEAL CATEGORIES

LEVEL OF APPEAL	1	2	3	4
Percent of Newscast Time	35.5	19.4	9.6	35.4

P<.001 Chi-square, df=1, .47, Non-significant

STATION 3: KBIG

DISCOVERY COST: PROPORTION OF STORIES BY COST CATEGORY

DISCOVERY COST	1	2	3	4
Percent of All Stories	8.9	42.2	35.6	13.3

N=90 RESPONSE RATE=90%

Chi-square, df=1, .04, Non-significant

PROPORTION OF NEWSCAST TIME BY COST CATEGORY

DISCOVERY COST	1	2	3	4
Percent of Newscast Time	7.4	24.0	51.4	17.2

Chi-square, df=1; 29.0, p<.001

ASSEMBLY COST: PROPORTION OF STORIES BY COST CATEGORY

ASSEMBLY COST	1	2	3	4
Percent of All Stories	57.6	24.2	10.6	7.6

N=66 RESPONSE RATE=66%

Chi-square, df=1, 27.7, p<.001

PROPORTION OF NEWSCAST TIME BY COST CATEGORY

ASSEMBLY COST	1	2	3	4
Percent of Newscast Time	26.9	34.6	15.0	23.4

Chi-square, df=1; 3.80, p<.06

OVERALL APPEAL: PROPORTION OF STORIES BY APPEAL CATEGORIES

LEVEL OF APPEAL	1	2	3	4
Percent of All Stories	0	10.1	54.4	35.4

N=79 Response Rate=79%

Chi-square, df=1, 50.2, p<.001

OVERALL APPEAL: PROPORTION OF NEWSCAST TIME BY APPEAL CATEGORIES

LEVEL OF APPEAL	1	2	3	4
Percent of Newscast Time	0	4.9	50.7	44.4

Chi-square, df=1, 64, p<.001

CONSEQUENCE APPEAL: PROPORTION OF STORIES BY APPEAL CATEGORIES

LEVEL OF APPEAL	1	2	3	4
Percent of All Stories	29.1	32.9	24.1	13.9

N=79 Response Rate=79%

Chi-square, df=1, 4.57, p<.05

CONSEQUENCE APPEAL: PROPORTION OF NEWSCAST TIME BY APPEAL CATEGORIES

LEVEL OF APPEAL	1	2	3	4
Percent of Newscast Time	24.7	28.6	30.2	16.4

Chi-square, df=1, .28, Non-significant

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